

International Small Arms Disarmament: Menace or Challenge

**by
Virginia H. Ezell**

It would do no good to stand here and list the more than 600 organizations that have taken on the task of monitoring worldwide small arms proliferation. Four years ago I presented a paper here describing the aspirations of a small group individuals and organizations who had gathered near Harvard Yard in the cold days of February 1994. The aim of their meeting was simply to get together to discuss the various issues relating to small arms transfers, exchange business cards and ideas. Today the network of activists which began in 1994 is bigger, stronger and more vibrant. They have taken the issue, defined the problem and the terms of discussion for the media, governments, and "civil society." To a great extent they control the international debate, if there is one, on small arms transfers.

The difference between now and four years ago is that a movement of the few who took this topic seriously has burgeoned into a cottage industry of the many. Their goals are varied, from strict controls over small arms transfers to moratoria on the trade and production. The results of their work will affect how, or even perhaps whether, you do business in the future.

The largest organizations with infrastructures which facilitated fund raising to support their early campaigns have been from the traditional disarmament community: the British American Security Information Center (BASIC), the Center for Defense Information (CDI), Worldwatch Institute, Saferworld, Human Rights Watch, and the Monterey Institute for Strategic Studies. Each of these organizations has a web site for dissemination of information as well as a means of self-promotion. They each have a program entitled "small arms" or "light weapons project" through which they coordinate activities in this arena. They all have several people on staff working full time on various aspects of the problem of small arms proliferation. Several organizations not usually associated with disarmament, for example relief agencies such as OXFAM and the International Committee for the Red Cross, have more recently joined in this international movement.

In the beginning, the early proponents of international small arms disarmament had a single idea: all guns are bad. They appeared to be voices in the wilderness, the geopolitical situation was in a state of transition from a nuclear stand-off to a Post-Cold War multi-polar world. Their first obstacle was to fix the attention of world leaders on the issue of small arms as a serious problem which threatens world peace. To achieve their ultimate goal, leaders within the original disarmament network determined to change international norms concerning small arms.

Norms are part of a belief system. They make up the foundation on which issues are understood and establish the context within which a group defines itself and the world around it. Norms represent a group's paradigms. They help distinguish good from evil.

In this instance, the international disarmament organizations proposed to make it socially unacceptable for nations to have infantry weapons. Unlike earlier pacifist movements, the disarmament community of the 1990's intended to go beyond appealing to the decision-makers and raise the consciousness of individual citizens. To do that they needed media attention. To get that they needed money.

A brief review of the largest grants is one measure of their success. Since 1995 grants to various disarmament groups have exceeded \$6 million. This is in addition to the \$5 million grant presented to Human Rights Watch to establish its small arms project in 1991. Most of the money has been targeted for specific programs to study the problem of small arms proliferation rather than general operating funds.

For example, the Rockefeller Foundation presented the Human Rights Watch with a grant of \$500,000 "for continued support to create new norms and attitudes toward the proliferation and use of arms." The Carnegie Corporation of New York gave the Arms Control Association (ACA) \$100,000 for a "program on arms control and national security for the Washington press corp." The Kendall Foundation also gave the ACA \$50,000 "to advance public understanding and support for arms control." Saferworld received over \$17,000 in one grant from the MacArthur Foundation to "coordinate activities in Europe and the United States that promote an international arms trade code of conduct." BASIC received a two-year \$150,000 grant from the MacArthur Foundation for work "toward networking in policy analysis and public education activities focused on regional security in Europe and conventional arms trade." The Cowell Foundation gave the Human Rights Watch \$18,000 to support that organization's Project to Ban Blinding Lasers. They also gave an organization called Ploughshares a two-year grant of \$40,000 for the conventional arms portion of that group's Mainstream Media Project. The list goes on.

Another measure of their success might be to look at the various international agreements that have been drawn up and signed over the past several years. In November 1997 the members of the Organization of American States (OAS) agreed to a small arms proliferation convention "against the illicit manufacturing of and trafficking in firearms, ammunition, explosives, and other related materials." Although each of the members has signed the treaty, to date only a handful have ratified it. This treaty generally proscribes the methods of arms transfers between the members. It calls for sharing of information between various law enforcement agencies of the member states. (Inter-American Convention Against The Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives and Other Related Materials, Article II, November 1997.)

The OAS convention is the first international agreement specifically oriented toward regulating small arms transfers. Other international agreements, the Wassenaar Arrangement on Export Controls for Conventional Arms and Dual-Use Goods and Technologies, the United Nations Transparency in Armaments Initiative, and the Convention on Conventional Weapons, were designed to control trade in conventional weapons excluding small arms.

The disarmament community has been campaigning to include small arms in these agreements and conventions. According to Geraldine O'Callaghan, a small arms specialist at BASIC, the OAS convention is a good beginning which should be used as a template for similar regional agreements. In a recent meeting to discuss the progress in the field of small arms disarmament, in her remarks O'Callaghan said that because illegal transfers began as legal ones, "we cannot allow the legal and the illegal to be separated."

Based on what some consider a controversial resolution from the United Nations' Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), disarmament groups now are calling for the international community to link crime and conflict. According to one analyst the "breakdown of national boundaries has

ended the distinction between conflict and crime. Firearms are the weapon of choice for combatants and criminals alike." (statement by Geraldine O'Callaghan, at UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice 7th session, Vienna, Austria, 21-30 April 1998)

The ECOSOC resolution recommends "measures to regulate firearms" based on ECOSOC'S Commission on Crime Prevention. It includes provisions for identifying arms throughout the transfer process. In addition to traditional serial numbering, weapons will be marked at each stage in the transfer process to help identify not only the source of supply but the route the weapons took before reaching their final destination.

While the Inter-American convention addresses the illicit trade it does not relate to internal human rights violations resulting from small arms abuses nor does it address domestic civilian small arms issues. At the same meeting, Dr. Natalie Goldring, also from BASIC, said in reference to the United States as a major supplier of conventional weapons, "failure to regulate internally is open season to illicit traffickers." She suggested that without strong internal regulations governing firearms ownership the United States represents a possible major source of supply in the illicit traffic in small arms in Latin America.

Finally, another measure of their success might be in the number of international or supranational organizations which have entertained discussions on this topic. As mentioned, one international organization known as the Wassenaar Arrangement concentrates not only on conventional weapons transfers but includes technology transfers as its mandate. Transparency in arms transfers is the main aim of this successor to the Cold-War era CoCom group (Coordinating Committee). Although small arms have yet to be added to the list of controlled items, some members, primarily Japan, have called for inclusion of small arms on the list.

United Nations Secretary General Koffi Anan has expressed an interest in the problem of small arms proliferation. Within the UN secretariat the Department of Disarmament Affairs includes a section dedicated to investigating aspects of small arms proliferation. Anan convened a panel of small arms experts to study the issue. Their report, issued in 1997, called for a number of actions from members of the United Nations.

Among its findings the panel reported that "accumulations of small arms and light weapons by themselves do not cause the conflicts in which they are used. The availability of these weapons, however, contributes towards exacerbating conflicts by increasing the lethality and duration of violence, by encouraging a violent rather than a peaceful resolution of differences, and by generating a vicious circle of a greater sense of insecurity, which in turn leads to a greater demand for, and use of, such weapons." (para. 10, UN DOC A/52/298, "Report of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms"). The panel recommended identification and destruction of surpluses, improved methods of marking weapons, restricting manufacturing and trade to designated authorized dealers and manufacturers, and use of the OAS convention as a model for other inter-regional agreements on illicit arms trafficking. (para. 79, *ibid.*)

Most recently the members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) agreed to a three-year moratorium on arms transfers into and out of the region. The government of Mali initiated the call for a moratorium on small arms imports and exports in the region. The move was headed by Mali President Alpha Omar Konare who said that arms supplies of rifles and other small arms were a threat to stability. His call for a moratorium is consistent with earlier actions taken by the current government. In March 1996 with great international fanfare

the government, with cooperation from opposition leaders, burned weapons surrendered by former anti-government militiamen as part of a peace agreement. The arms moratorium was signed in March 1998. (Reuters, 27 March 1998)

Also within the United Nations, the Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Division in ECOSOC also has initiated programs focused on the study of small arms proliferation. Most recently a commission on crime prevention and criminal justice submitted its report on firearms regulation. This report dealt primarily with civilian firearms ownership as well as manufacturing and trade. The focus was on law enforcement issues affecting control of the illegal use of firearms. From their findings the ECOSOC presented in April 1998 a draft resolution to strengthen legal institutions and measures to regulate firearms transfers and manufacturing. In May 1998 the United States government presented a similar recommendation for consideration by the G-8 at their summit in the United Kingdom.

In Europe, the European Union is about to adopt a Code of Conduct relating to arms transfers. Based on an earlier version passed in 1991 by the European Council of Ministers, the European Code of Conduct is intended to prevent destabilizing small arms transfers through a policy of transparency. The problem with the code in its current state, say disarmament advocates, is that the decision to go ahead with any transfers continues to rest with the individual national governments. This leaves room for interpretation, and loopholes according to some analyses. (BASIC Reports No. 64, 4 June 1998).

In addition, the United States House of Representatives also passed its own version of a Code of Conduct concerning conventional weapons transfers. Whether the current version will pass in the Senate depends on which side of the debate is predicting the outcome.

It appears that there are only two organizations involved in the debate opposing and at times openly hostile to these various groups: the National Rifle Association and a relatively new group called the World Forum on the Future of Sport Shooting Activities (WFSA). The latter was initiated by members of the NRA concerned about the direction international efforts in the small arms debate were taking. WFSA members include the NRA, small arms and ammunition manufacturing associations, as well as European and international sport shooting associations. No figures were available on the NRA's investment in its own efforts as a non-governmental organization.

As you can see, disarmament projects are still in their early stages. The international community is only now catching up to the small arms disarmament movement. Governments and international organizations have taken on the task of controlling small arms transfers. The media turns to the disarmament community for information, interpretation and analysis of current events.

Not resting on their laurels, the various disarmament organizations have more in store. Things to look for in the future include:

Greater emphasis on linking legal and illegal transfers. In an attempt to influence public perceptions, they will continue to draw a link between combat and crime with analysis based on the hypothesis that world affairs now make it difficult to distinguish one from the other. Whether governments have made this leap is one question, but clearly these organizations have already done so.

There will be more pressure to include small arms transfers in existing or pending transparency programs. Using the OAS convention as a template they will show that transparency works. They already are calling for governments considering arms trade codes of conduct to incorporate transparency in those regimes.

At some point it is likely you will see representatives from industries involved in trade with the developing world getting involved in the debate. The issue of small arms transfers will be linked with the idea that a transfer leads to instability in a region or country. Instability is the current enemy which has replaced the old Soviet threat. It interferes with international commerce and development programs. The result could be a focus, at a minimum, financial support for small arms disarmament campaigns from major investors in third world development programs. It is in their interest to promote stability however it is being defined.

There will be more calls for additional moratoria similar to the one adopted in West Africa. Although there may be some question as to its effectiveness given the current situation in Guinea-Bissau, the outcome of that conflict and actions of the member states over the next three years will be the real test. Before that time the small arms disarmament community will put increased pressure to implement further moratoria as a means of stopping the trade.

There will be more pressure coming from the grassroots level. The aim will be to continue to galvanize public opinion at the national level to achieve the international goal of a highly regulated and restricted if not outright ban on the small arms trade. Those of you who attended the Eurosatory exhibition in Paris this year may recall the large number of protesters and their belligerent attitude at the front gates of Le Bourget. Compare that to the handful of quiet demonstrators there just two years ago.

Not only has the small arms disarmament community gotten control of the message, they have created an information need, a demand for information in this field. In the process they have established themselves as the sole source of supply for that information. The momentum is in their favor. The overall effect of these campaigns will change the way, perhaps even whether, the small arms industry does business in the future.